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The Ethics of Librarianship

A Proposal for a Revised Code

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THE librarian's profession is sometimes thought to be of recent origin whereas it is as old as learning itself. At the dawn of civilization we find the priesthood with temples and tablets; while the keeper of records stood from the first as the organizer and custodian of inscribed knowledge. The annals of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, of monasteries in the deserts of northern Africa or on the Mount of Sinai, all picture the scribe as the preserver of divinations, prayers, proclamations and epics inscribed on clay, papyrus and parchment. The librarian has ever been a scholar, and usually he has been allied with the ceremonials of religion. Ethics, therefore, have been inherent in his profession even when not expressed in a code. The American colonies and then the states, although absurdly modern as compared with the Old World, have outstripped the continent of Europe in developing tax-supported libraries for the benefit of the rank and file of the people. Organization and ideals of service have gone hand in hand. In September, 1853, a convention of fifty-three delegates from libraries assembled in New York, inspired to confer together by the awakening conscience in England three or four years earlier.

The first conference which led to permanent results was held at Philadelphia in 1876, when the American Library Association was formed, and the *Library Journal* was established as its advocate. This organization was followed by state commissions, and local associations, and of late by socie-

ties of librarians allied with special trades and industries. New library periodicals followed, and a keen study of library methods and standards very naturally resulted. We are now at a point where the leaders of library progress who came together at Philadelphia are passing away, leaving the work to younger men and women. They were figures that loom larger as we draw away from their era. Their high ideals for the profession were recorded in addresses and in discussions from time to time during the last fifty years.

Two decades ago the first signs of a code began to win notice. Miss Mary Wright Plummer, a librarian whose character made a lasting impress on the profession, gave an address on the "Pros and Cons of Librarianship" before the Illinois Library Association, April 14, 1903, which was printed in *Public Libraries* for May of the same year. From this address Miss Plummer printed extracts in a leaflet of four pages, entitled "The Fourth Essential." This pioneer effort speaks clearly of a code and therefore seems worthy of record here in full. It is printed from her own revised copy:

Doctors, lawyers and ministers, college professors, officers of the army and navy, have a certain code which presupposes that they are gentlemen and wish to remain such. A breach of this etiquette strikes at the foundations of their order. Librarians and educators in general have their code still to make. The fact that these codes are for the most part unwritten, makes them no less binding; they are like debts of honor, which, although unre-

corded, must be paid first of all debts. If we were making a code for librarianship, what would it have to be to help that calling to rank among the professions? Surely the following would be some of its requirements:

We must have dignity, and if we have to advertise, we must be careful how we do it.

We must have humility. All boasting of ourselves or of our work is out of place.

We must realize our individual limitations and be willing to learn before we try to teach.

We must consider our work one of humanity, and must be ready, like doctors, to attend to pressing cases, in season and out of season. Too rigid holding to one's hours savors of the trades-union.

We must have esprit de corps, and librarianship must be, even more than now, a sort of free-masonry.

We must believe in our work, quietly, not ostentatiously.

We must suppress our natural tendencies, where they conflict with the best interests of the profession, and, if necessary, be willing to give up the work for the good of the work.

It comes to my ears that I am said to be too loud, too boisterous, too flippant and familiar to be in charge of a library, or even on its staff. The thing to do is not to get angry, but to keep a sharp lookout that this criticism shall no longer have the least foundation.

I hear that my methods are antiquated, that I prefer ruts and my own comfort to the service of the public. It is plainly my duty not to resent this without self-examination, and if I find it true, either to infuse more energy and self-denial into my character or to yield my place to some one who can fill it worthily.

We should say to ourselves, Am I, personally, a credit to librarianship, and if not, what is wrong with me? Am I helping to make librarianship a profession, or am I hindering?

Within a year or two several other addresses, touching more or less exactly on ethics, appeared. Miss Genevieve M. Walton's paper, inspired perhaps by an earlier effort by

Miss Linda M. Duval, was typical of the best of these. In 1908 and 1909 a group of librarians was accustomed to dine at frequent intervals in Boston. From this group a tentative code of library ethics was drawn up by the present writer and after discussion point by point it reached the form in seventeen sections printed in *Public Libraries* under the title, "The Librarian's Canons of Ethics." The same code, after being submitted to discussion for three years, was revised, enlarged and reprinted in 1912 with twenty-five sections. These canons of ethics were in turn discussed by the Council of the American Library Association at Chicago in December, 1913, and 1914. The Council's deliberations, as well as the more recent criticisms and suggestions by more than twenty-five of the leading librarians of the United States, have influenced and molded this code of thirty sections which the author herewith presents. Dr. J. I. Wyer, director of the Albany Library School, a library expert of long and varied experience, has, with the aid of his staff, contributed materially to this thorough revision of the subject. Especial phases the author has discussed with Herbert Putnam, librarian of Congress, and H. H. B. Meyer, Arthur E. Bostwick of St. Louis, Azariah S. Root of Oberlin, Bernard C. Steiner of Baltimore, June R. Donnelly of Boston, Hiller C. Wellman of Springfield, George F. Bowerman of Washington, Josephine A. Rathbone of Brooklyn, Clement W. Andrews of Chicago, Frank K. Walter of Minneapolis, Mrs. Julia G. Babcock of California, Phineas L. Windsor of Urbana and with his own staff.

We assume that these canons of ethics stand in the position of counselor to the younger men and women of the profession, combining worldly wisdom with unworldly ideals. They strive

to describe the type of librarian whom Sam Walter Foss, poet, librarian, and man of the world, so eloquently showed forth both in his career and in his writings. It was Mr. Foss who said:¹

The first great cardinal virtues of a librarian should be toleration and enthusiasm. These are qualities that are not easily combined, for a man who is tolerant is usually not enthusiastic, and a man who is enthusiastic is seldom tolerant. A man who combines these two qualities must be lymphatic and nervous at the same time—a kind of hot cake of ice. But we put lemons into lemonade to make it sour and put sugar into the same lemonade to make it sweet. So we put toleration into a librarian to make him judicial, and we put enthusiasm into him to make him human. . . .

If the man is tolerant at the inner core he has the first prime requisite of librarianship. He is ready to stand in his library, as at the threshold of a wayside inn, and welcome all his guests with an equal smile. . . .

Be a public and not a private man. Get out and feel the dynamic thrill that comes from contact with live men. The club, the exchange, the street, the philanthropic and economic organizations that are feeling out for the betterment of mankind are the places where the librarian should be found frequently. He should be the best known man or woman in the city. A dollar bill that never circulates is not worth as much as a coppercent that keeps moving. Nearly every librarian ought to double the circulation of his books and treble the circulation of himself. . . .

He is the custodian of the intellectual treasures of his town; he is the adviser of its scholars, the teacher of its teachers and the keeper of the keys of the vaults of knowledge. The intellectual leadership has passed away, to some extent, from the clergy. The other learned professions—doctors, lawyers and teachers—are so circumscribed by their specialties that they cannot, unless they are very great, become the tolerant and catholic intellectual latitudinarians that we look for in the truly unbiased, educated man. This is the

librarian's modern opportunity. Let him be the intellectual file-leader of his community. Let him grow big enough to fill the great place it is his duty to assume.

Coming now to the canons, we treat first of the librarian's relation to his trustees. Next in order comes his relation to his staff, and their duty to him. And then follows his relation to other librarians. Beyond this lies the all-important relation of a librarian to the public.

Taking up first the librarian's relation to his trustees, we have:

I. RESPONSIBILITY

In the organization of a library by the trustees, much of their authority is usually delegated to the librarian. He should not chafe if the trustees as a body feel called upon from time to time to exercise the authority vested in them as guardians of the public interest.

In a large library a tactful and efficient librarian will accumulate power by that factor in human nature which delegates responsibility as rapidly as an executive officer proves his fitness to exercise authority. This is a menace to the librarian's character unless he returns again and again to the trustees as the source of his authority. He must show readiness to assume responsibility without becoming a law unto himself.

II. AUTHORITY

Under proper conditions the librarian to whom the entire board delegates authority should be able to exercise more power than any single trustee; and since the policy of looking to the librarian for results requires that a considerable measure of authority be delegated to him, habitual distrust of his judgment or disregard of his recommendations may well lead him to seek opportunity for usefulness elsewhere.

In a small library where the trustees comprise the few men and women of literary influence in the town the

¹ *Public Libraries*, March, 1909, page 77.

librarian receives a meagre salary, works for short periods, and is often of necessity a clerk or desk attendant in fact although librarian in name. The delegation of administrative authority to a single trustee is here practical. In the case of a large library this would be destructive of all librarianship. The trustees do a greater service by replacing an incompetent librarian by a new one than by assuming themselves the burden of his work.

III. ALLIANCES

A librarian should not ally himself with one trustee to the exclusion of other members of the board from his confidence.

If a librarian is to confide in one trustee more than in another this should be the chairman of his board or of a committee, a difficult and embarrassing course where the chairman appears to be indifferent and another trustee earnest and peculiarly congenial. But to avoid the pitfall of social, racial or religious cliques he is better off in moderate isolation than as the intimate of a faction. Although the librarian thinks that he knows the type of trustee best suited to the need of his town he is on dangerous ground if he attempts to influence the selection of a trustee.

IV. LOYALTY

When a librarian cannot, in his dealings with the public, be entirely loyal to a policy which is clearly upheld by his trustees, he should indicate to the public, as far as possible, the reasons for this policy without expressing his own opinion; he should also explain his position to the board, and in an extreme case offer to resign.

Stress should be placed on the words *extreme case*, for it is the business of a librarian to get on rather than to get out. Some librarians under impossible conditions believe that an executive should await removal instead of resigning. On the whole a librarian,

like a clergyman, serves his profession best when he keeps away from unpleasant publicity. The obvious remedy for this problem is for the trustees to keep their policy broad and free from detail.

V. SINCERITY

To delay bringing a plan before the trustees until it is certain to obtain adequate presentation and a fair hearing may be considered only common wisdom; but to abstain from urging a project until a known opponent happens to be absent is unprofessional as well as insincere.

This is the old question: Does the end (here the public good) justify the means? Adroitness can be cultivated to a point where it impinges upon intrigue and in that form has more than once proved a fatal accomplishment.

VI. REJECTED MEASURES

A wise librarian, when a measure has been deliberately rejected by his trustees, will not bring it forward again until new conditions prevail.

To see a cherished measure fail from indifference on the part of trustees or perhaps through a chance word of ridicule is hard to bear. But time is long and a librarian has need of serenity.

Turning now to the second of our subjects, the librarian's attitude toward those with whom he labors from day to day, we have a relationship which has been broadened and enriched by a more human understanding. This new spirit which moves on the face of the waters is the essence of the age in which we live.

VII. DUTY TO THE STAFF

A librarian is bound, as opportunity offers, to allow an assistant to prove her ability to do work of a higher character than that usually assigned to her, and to advance those that are capable to more responsible positions in his own library or

elsewhere. He must also spend the money of his institution with due prudence, and get a full return for it in service. Although efficiency of the staff is temporarily reduced by frequent transfer of assistants to new positions or to other libraries, in the end a library whose workers are seen to obtain rapid and solid advancement profits by its reputation in this respect.

It might be said in reply that taxpayers do not conceive of a town library merely as a training school for other municipalities. Nor is the librarian fortunate if, after a term of years, he has lost the brightest of his staff and has retained for a lengthy old age the dull out of all those whom he has trained. Perhaps the only relief is to make the variety of work so attractive and the social opportunities so marked that members of the staff are loath to leave. The librarian should keep his staff familiar with events connected with the library in so far as these contribute to their intelligent interest in its welfare.

VIII. PERMANENCE

Having in mind that not salary but opportunity for service makes librarianship a profession, the worker should not be too eager to move. Permanence makes for dignity and influence in a community. No opportunity to serve the public can honorably be considered merely as a stepping stone or place of passage.

This canon partakes of the nature of sacrifice, but a librarian who is not at heart a missionary has chosen the wrong outlet for his energies. Under ordinary circumstances a year is the least period of service that should satisfy the conscience of an assistant.

It scarcely seems necessary to add that a librarian who has no real thought of resigning employs a doubtful expedient if he tells his trustees that he thinks of moving on unless his salary is increased.

IX. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Each member of the staff should be regarded by the librarian as an individual, a colleague, capable of performing his particular work, and encouraged to feel his individual responsibility for this work. Where public recognition of work of outstanding merit will advance the interests of an assistant the librarian should be quick to grant it.

The wise librarian will allow to the intelligent assistant latitude in the enforcement of rules, and in their interpretation. The degree of latitude will depend on the rank and character of the assistant.

On the other hand, assistants too often claim advancement for performing the minimum work required. It is safe to say that an assistant who habitually does more than is asked cannot be kept in obscurity.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

Breaches in morality and honesty are fundamental, and should be mentioned discreetly if a "recommendation" is given. Peculiarities in personality may be handicaps in one library but assets in a library of a different type. A wise librarian may mention but should not stress these, and the librarian to whom recommendations are sent will weigh so-called "defects" in the light of his own conditions and environment.

To recommend an unsatisfactory assistant, merely to get rid of that assistant, is unworthy of any administrator.

Recommendations are an important function of a librarian's routine, and upon them careers depend for success or failure. Charity and conscience must between them determine the degree of fidelity which the portrait is to assume.

XI. THE STAFF'S DUTY TO THE LIBRARIAN

A librarian has a right to entire loyalty from his staff, although he may be called upon at times to face frank comment from them. Such criticism should never go beyond the library doors, nor should the staff carry complaints over the librarian's

head to the trustees, except in extreme cases.

Conversely, the librarian's criticism of a member of the staff should be as private as the welfare of the library will permit. For just treatment the staff look to the librarian, and the trustee who comes between the librarian and a member of his staff lessens executive authority and in the end breaks up the morale of the entire staff.

XII. THE STAFF'S DUTY TO THE LIBRARY

An assistant should not allow personal antagonisms within the library to injure efficiency, nor should the staff tolerate a cabal of congenial spirits that tends to break up the membership into groups ready at hand for rivalries and jealousies.

Long periods of idleness in the case of an assistant should be called to the attention of the superior officer. Leisure has its dangers, and should be used for self-improvement as the best return for compensation received.

XIII. THE WORK AND THE WORKER

The assistant should realize that the work is more important than the worker; that the assignment of an uncongenial task is not due to a personal grudge nor a slight to the assistant, but a necessity enforced by the work that must be done by someone.

In the assignment of work and arrangement of schedule of hours, marked leniency toward members of long service, thereby shifting burdens to younger assistants, creates an unsatisfactory atmosphere. Long service should rarely be urged as a reason for favored treatment, nor should a low salary be advanced as an excuse for poor work.

XIV. PERSONAL OBLIGATION

Each assistant should realize his own personal obligation as a public servant to each library patron. He should strive always to be courteous and pleasant, re-

membering that the staff stands as the interpreter of the library to the public and that it may be materially helped or harmed by his individual conduct.

An assistant sometimes fails to realize that some of the more desirable constituents who use the library are shy. To the mind of such a user of books the friendly assistant personifies the library. Habitual ridicule in private of mistakes or ignorance on the part of the public will affect, eventually, the conduct of the assistant.

XV. HEALTH

Health is an assumed qualification in a librarian's equipment, and continued ill health does not ordinarily entitle an employe to favored treatment by a public institution.

Conversely, the library should conserve the health of the staff by furnishing the best possible equipment as regards light, air, sanitation, and rest.

Unfortunately the ill health of one assistant throws routine burdens on other members of the staff. It is a duty therefore to keep fit out of consideration for others. Miss Rathbone says: "Far more than ever before do men today realize that health is a matter of individual achievement, the result of intelligent effort." In large libraries a medical adviser is connected with the staff and obviously has a quasi-jurisdiction over their habits of life outside of library hours. Illness in the family is not a valid claim for absence with pay. Each case must be met on its merits.

XVI. NOTICE OF RESIGNATION

Ethically considered, the assistant should, when seeking a change of position or when considering a definite offer from another library, consult the superior officer; but the personality of a superior officer will inevitably influence an assistant's course of action. Having accepted a position, the assistant should give adequate notice before leaving.

This subject is perhaps the most controversial of all those which are treated in these canons of ethics. It has been suggested that one's dissatisfaction should be brought to the attention of the librarian, in order that conditions may be remedied. But a mere notice that an assistant is "looking about" may result in uncomfortable personal relations lasting for several months or even years. The librarian should be careful not to prejudice himself against an assistant who desires advancement in another field of service when the right opportunity offers.

A librarian owes much to other librarians and to the professional associations, which are created for mutual benefit. We are not free lances engaged in warfare with our fellow-workers. In these relations we have:

XVII. EXPERT ADVICE

A librarian may not accept an appointment to act as an expert adviser to the trustees of another library, even when solicited, without the request, or at least without the full knowledge, of the librarian concerned.

The analogy is to be found in the physician, who may not advise a patient unless the attending physician requests it, or until the attending physician has been dismissed. At the same time there are the "survey" and the "efficiency test" that are becoming popular means of improving conditions. The expert librarian will in time take his place with the "consulting expert." It is a natural function of the leader in his profession. Nevertheless there must be reasonable consideration for the humbler brother of the same profession.

XVIII. PRIVATE ADVICE

A librarian should feel free to claim counsel from others in the same calling, and should be willing to give such counsel

when requested, without publicity or expense.

One of the outstanding merits of a certain librarian who was still "in harness" at the age of ninety-two was his willingness to consult men young enough to be his grandsons. Questionnaires, however, too often go beyond bounds in their call upon the librarian's time.

XIX. RIVALRY

Librarians should be slow to publish statistics in order to show superiority of a library over neighboring libraries, such statistics often requiring qualification or explanation. A similar comparison in words is of questionable taste, and any printed criticism should always bear clearly the librarian's name.

One can turn to annual reports of librarians which give comparative statistics with the undoubted desire to enlighten taxpayers. At the same time in so doing the librarian may embarrass other librarians who happen to be placed in a less favorable position.

XX. ENGAGING AN ASSISTANT

A librarian may not take the initiative in negotiation for the services of an assistant in another library until he has made his intention known to the assistant's superior officer; or he may make his intention known to both assistant and official superior simultaneously.

Objection has been raised to consultation with a librarian over his minor assistant, but most librarians agree that before negotiations begin with an important member of another staff courtesy at least calls for a personal letter to his or her chief.

XXI. PREDECESSORS

A librarian who makes a habit of commenting unfavorably on the work of his predecessors in office invites criticism of his good taste.

The coming of a new librarian is a strain upon the staff, and if the mem-

bers are to give him their loyalty he should not speak slightly of one to whom they have given their loyalty in the past.

A librarian's obligation to the public exists in many forms. He needs to keep constantly before his mind that it is the *use* of knowledge rather than the storage and classification of knowledge that is the vital factor in his work.

XXII. A LIBRARIAN'S PROVINCE

It is the librarian's duty to be a force in the community, and contact with people even more than with books engenders force. We must not confuse the duties of librarian and assistant; the one is always associated with *people*, although in a small library he (or she) may do all the work; the assistant may or may not be called upon to meet the public, but generally has specific duties to which specific hours must be given.

The great Panizzi of the British Museum so far failed to heed the principle involved in this canon that he came very near to losing his position. He wished to do the work of a bibliographer, delegating his powers to a subordinate while he retained the honors of a head librarian. The subordinate by contact with people soon became his master.

Censorship of reading is a perilous No Man's Land on the boundary of a librarian's province. How far an executive should go in exposing for use books which are in his opinion destructive of morals and society, and those issued frankly as propaganda, is a serious question. The announcement of a policy lies with a board of trustees, rather than with the librarian. Mr. H. C. Wellman in an address entitled "An Article of Faith" discusses very clearly the librarian's responsibility in the field of censorship.

XXIII. REPUTATION

A reputation acquired by work for the public in the profession or in kindred paths of

service adds to the dignity and power of the librarian. But the value of the work must advertise the worker, and self-advertising is outside the pale.

A profession is like a sonnet. It confines the effort to a prescribed channel, but stimulates a higher standard of excellence within the self-imposed bounds.

XXIV. BEARING IN PUBLIC

A librarian as a person of influence, and seeking the respect of all his fellow-citizens, cannot carelessly choose his company, nor indulge in habits and tastes that offend the social or moral sense. These self-limitations are in the nature of hostages which he gives for the general good. He must not limit his advisers to one circle, for he needs a wide horizon, ready sympathies, and the good will of all classes.

One may have heard a librarian say: "It is nobody's business what I do outside the library." That type of library worker has merely mistaken his calling and should change his vocation.

XXV. USE OF HIS NAME

A librarian should stand on neutral ground and should be chary of lending his name to a public controversy to add weight to the contention of a local faction, or to commercial enterprises, even those that have an educational or philanthropic motive. Having a financial interest in any material device, invention, or book proposed for purchase in his library, the librarian should inform his trustees of this interest. It would be better not to have a financial interest in companies whose business is largely with libraries.

His advice will very naturally be sought by his constituents increasingly as his influence grows, but giving for publication a testimonial to a book is likely to lead to serious abuses. Standing on neutral ground, he should be all things to all men. "He loves all ideas—even when he despises them and disbelieves in them—for he knows

that the ferments and chemic reactions of ideas keep the old world from growing mouldy and mildewed and effete."²

XXVI. HONORARIUM

An honorarium for work done in library hours should not be accepted, and a librarian should be slow to undertake commissions for work outside library hours which might easily be executed in library hours without expense to the citizen.

If a librarian feels impelled to add to his income by outside work it is wiser to earn by an avocation than by his vocation. Work which claims much of the librarian's strength and does not add directly or indirectly to his reputation or to that of the institution should be made known to the trustees.

Beyond this there is a limitless field for our canons of ethics to cover. We cannot hope to mention all the ways in which a librarian may be stimulated to high ideals. In his personal relation to books we may say:

XXVII. BOOK SELECTION

Purchases of books should reflect the needs of the community rather than the personal taste or interest of the librarian. His selection of books should be catholic, and his power to guide be exercised with discretion.

A library is not a collection of books made after a fixed pattern. Each community has its bookish needs unlike those of any other community under the sun. It is this infinite variety that gives the profession which collects and makes books useful its attraction.

² Sam Walter Foss.

XXVIII. SPECIALIZING

The librarian should not permit specialized book collecting or book reading to narrow his field of interest, nor to bias his judgment, nor to make him a rival collector to his library. The number of points of contact with knowledge and with his public determines to some extent the librarian's usefulness.

The fringes of all knowledge bound the administrator's province, but he, like his assistant, may by mastery of a single subject increase the renown and the usefulness of his library.

XXIX. RELATION TO AGENTS

A librarian is bound to expend the funds intrusted to him with the best interest of the library in view. But he should remember that in employing an expert, ability and efficient service are worthy of proper compensation, and to sacrifice them for slightly better terms or to make frequent changes may not result to the library's permanent advantage.

He should not jeopardize his independence by accepting special favors from business firms.

If a librarian is in doubt about the propriety of accepting a gift he should at least insist that the gift be public knowledge. Favors often come disguised in a form to flatter the unsuspecting librarian.

And in conclusion:

XXX. PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT

The literature and the organizations of the profession claim consideration from the earnest and progressive librarian.

A high professional spirit calls for sound training, clear ethical standards, and sustained enthusiasm for the fellowship of librarians. *Non ministrari sed ministrare.*